Zenovich, 91, leaves lasting legacy in Fresno

By John Ellis
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George Zenovich always wanted to be a musician, but his career led him to be an attorney, appellate court justice, state lawmaker, Democratic Party activist, mentor and lobbyist.

He shared the political stage with some of the biggest names of a generation – President John F. Kennedy, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Govs. Ronald Reagan and Edmund G. "Pat" Brown and longtime state Assembly leader Jesse Unruh.

Mr. Zenovich played key roles in several significant pieces of California legislation, including creation of the landmark Agricultural Labor Relations Board, the State Arts Council and the California Housing Authority.

Still, longtime Fresno residents may best remember him as the guy who brought the squirrels back to Courthouse Park.

Mr. Zenovich, one of the last living Valley officials from the state's 1960s political scene, died Wednesday in Fresno surrounded by family.

A few minutes after Mr. Zenovich passed away, Gov. Jerry Brown arrived to visit. Instead, the governor stayed and visited with family members for more than an hour.

Mr. Zenovich was 91 and had been suffering with cancer. He had been in hospice care and spent his final weeks visiting with longtime Valley friends and political associates.

"I was so lucky to know George Zenovich and to be his friend," said Richard Lehman, a former congressman and state legislator who is now a Sacramento lobbyist. "I had so much respect for him. I never would have accomplished anything if it wasn't for him."

Mr. Zenovich, who often said that life was short, made music and politics a center of his life.

"I really didn't know what I wanted to do," Mr. Zenovich says in a 2006 video interview that is part of the California Appellate Court Legacy Project. He credited his father with pushing him to law school, but, "I think basically I wanted to be a musician. I think that was my underlying desire."

Mr. Zenovich played the violin first, then the viola and string bass. He was a concert master of the Fresno High School Orchestra and played music during a World War II stint in the U.S. Army Air Corps (he served as a Japanese code interceptor operator).

Lehman recalled that Mr. Zenovich talked like a musician when he met him in 1969. Lehman was attending the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Mr. Zenovich called to offer him a job in his Assembly office.

Lehman asked what he'd do, and got a groovy answer: "Whatever you want to do, baby."

Former Gov. George Deukmejian, a Republican who served with Mr. Zenovich in both the state Assembly and state Senate, echoed Lehman.

"He was always considered sort of a laid-back personality, with a musician's heart," Deukmejian said, recalling times Mr. Zenovich played music with other legislators.

Start of political career

After the war, Mr. Zenovich attended Fresno State College, where he nurtured his other lifelong loves – politics and political activism.

He became student body president. At the time, Fresno State was scheduled to play a football game in Oklahoma. But, as Zenovich recounted in his video interview, Oklahoma's Department of Athletics informed Fresno State that the team's two black players couldn't compete. One of them, the late Jack Kelley, was a friend of Mr. Zenovich's, and they had been drafted into service together.

Mr. Zenovich was furious. He tried to get the game canceled, even leading an effort to raise the $2,000 it would cost Fresno State to back out of the game.

It failed, but Mr. Zenovich recalled it as "a tremendous thing in my life." Lehman said civil rights activism was a constant in Mr. Zenovich's political career. In 1964, Zenovich marched with King during a Fresno visit to support fair housing.

Mr. Zenovich graduated in 1947 with a political science degree, then earned a law degree from the Southwestern University School of Law in Los Angeles. He was admitted to the State Bar in 1953.

While on an extended European trip in 1955, he met his future wife, Vera – everyone knows her as Kika – while visiting relatives in Yugoslavia. They married in 1955 in Belgrade.

Back home, Mr. Zenovich began to stretch his political arms, first by serving on the Fresno Democratic Central Committee and then as Fresno County coordinator for John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign.

In 1962, Mr. Zenovich won the 32nd Assembly District seat, which he held for eight years.

'Squirrelnapper'

Only a few months into office, Mr. Zenovich faced his first significant challenge: Fresno County Supervisor Norman Foley asked him to trap a couple of squirrels from the state Capitol grounds to repopulate downtown Fresno's Courthouse Park.

It wasn't as easy as it sounds, especially after a Sacramento County Assembly member got wind of the plan and launched his opposition.

But Mr. Zenovich stood his ground: "I promised the people of my district to bring back two furry animals of the opposite sex alive to institute a revival of the squirrel population in the Fresno County Courthouse Park. I intend to deliver in 15 days, God, the Assembly, the Assembly Squirrel Commission, Fish and Game Commission, the Department of Finance and the Capitol groundskeeper willing."

Mr. Zenovich was feted as a hero. Sheriff Melvin Willmirth presented him with a certificate: "In appreciation of outstanding service to the City of Fresno and Fresno County, when on April 2, 1963, he squirrelnapped from Sacramento six squirrels and presented them to populate the trees and grounds of Courthouse Park and thereby provided in tedious- and tension-filled times to the lives of these citizens a refreshing touch of springtime capriciousness."

By 1964, Mr. Zenovich was considered a "disciple" of legendary Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh, and in mid-1966 Unruh appointed him majority floor leader.

In 1970, Mr. Zenovich made the jump to the Senate, winning the 16th District seat. He replaced fellow Democrat Hugh Burns, winning a close race in a brutal battle against Clovis Republican Earl Smittcamp.

The Bee's Eli Setencich wrote that it was "one of the bitterest campaigns in local election history." One Smittcamp ad, according to The Bee, showed "hippies, forlorn children and dope addicts tied in with Zenovich's voting record in the Assembly."

"George was a good, solid liberal," Setencich said in an interview. As The Bee's politics writer, he covered Mr. Zenovich throughout his Senate career.

Deukmejian said Mr. Zenovich came across as warm and friendly, which allowed him not only to make friends in both political parties, but also to be an effective legislator.

"In general, when he got involved in some specific issue, he was very effective," Deukmejian said.

For Mr. Zenovich, his Senate time was marked by two major issues – trying to get a farm labor bill through the Legislature and his prolonged push to win the president pro tem post.

The 1970s were a different time in politics.

"He had very good friends on the Republican side back then," Lehman recalled. "It was a different atmosphere."

Debating a high schooler

Mr. Zenovich also had the guts to debate Brad Hill in 1972 when Hill was a Bullard High student.

"He represented the Democratic Party and I represented the Republican Party," Hill recalled. "We debated for a total of about five hours one day. We had a great time. It was a spirited and fun debate."

Hill – who is now presiding justice of the 5th District Court of Appeal in Fresno – also recalled that Mr. Zenovich was seemingly taking a huge political chance. He said it would likely never happen today.

"Talk about a high risk," he said. "It's like a Super Bowl team taking on Reedley College. There's nothing to gain here, folks."

Lehman recalled that Mr. Zenovich played key roles in creating the California Arts Council (the Dixon-Zenovich-Maddy California Arts Act of 1975), as well as legislation that authorized bonds for low- and moderate-income housing and established the California Housing Finance Agency.

But maybe the biggest piece of legislation he helped enact was the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which became the first law in the nation recognizing the rights of farmworkers to bargain collectively.

Zenovich took up the cause in 1973, but it wasn't until Ronald Reagan left the governor's office and was replaced by Jerry Brown that things began to move.

An agreement was announced in 1975 after a marathon 100-hour bargaining session with growers, legislators and union leaders. It was officially called the Alatorre-Zenovich-Dunlap-Berman Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975.

"George was a longtime friend and a rare public servant who combined wisdom, skill and basic practicality," Brown said in a statement. "His many friends will miss him."

Mr. Zenovich wasn't as successful in his quest to be Senate president pro tem, always falling short in efforts to oust San Diego Democrat James Mills. The quest even cost Mr. Zenovich his Industrial Relations Committee chairmanship.

By the time Mr. Zenovich won his third Senate term in 1978, he was already indicating he would accept appointment to either the superior court or appellate court bench.

In January 1979 – barely into his third Senate term – Brown made that a reality, appointing him to the 5th District Court of Appeal. The appellate court's downtown Fresno building now bears Mr. Zenovich's name.

Rosendo Peña, who was working in the state Public Defender's Office in Los Angeles, returned to Fresno to become a staff attorney for Mr. Zenovich.

"He was very easygoing as far as the way he interacted with folks, but he had a certain sense of what justice was," Peña said.

That likely came from his background, Peña said. Mr. Zenovich came to the appellate court straight from the Legislature, while most justices come from the superior court bench.

"He would have a good gut feeling about things and he'd go with that," Peña said.

But Peña, like many others – perhaps even Mr. Zenovich himself – knew that at heart, Mr. Zenovich's legacy lies in politics.

"He spent seven years on the Court of Appeal, but really his life's work was the Legislature," Peña said.

In fact, by the mid-1980s, Mr. Zenovich was back in politics – this time as a lobbyist. It was the final stop in a long and varied career that had seen him mentor several Valley politicians. The Zenovich line includes both Lehman and Jim Costa, who became congressmen after careers in the state Legislature, as well as former Assembly Member Rusty Areias. All are Democrats.

"George Zenovich was the quintessential public servant," Hill said. "We are all so proud to have our courthouse named after him to recognize his lifetime of service."

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INFOBOX

George Nicholas Zenovich

Born: April 29,1922

Died: Sept. 25, 2013

Occupation: civic activist, Democratic Party strategist, state legislator, attorney, jurist

Survivors: Wife of 58 years, Vera; daughters Ninon Aprea, Marina Zenovich; grandchildren Nicole Alexandra Aprea, Theodore George Dalton Morgan; and son-in-law Peter G. Morgan

Services: Pending